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SUBJECT: CONDITIONS FACING ETHNIC MINORITY PROTESTANTS IN  
NORTHWEST PROVINCES OF LAO CAI, YEN BAI

REF: HANOI 392, HANOI 395

Summary and Comment  
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¶1. (SBU) An Embassy and DRL/IRF team recently visited the Northwest provinces of Lao Cai and Yen Bai to examine social conditions for ethnic minorities and to advocate for the rapid registration of ethnic minority Protestant groups. Protestant leaders from the region reported that local officials either refused to accept applications for registration or refused to allow groups to worship until registered. One house church leader was reportedly forced to renounce his faith. Poloff repeatedly stressed the importance of registering groups for advancing both the GVN's own policy and the bilateral relationship. For their part, the local authorities met by the team seem to now recognize that the GVN has made resolving the issue of registering Protestant groups a major policy priority. Local and provincial officials generally denied receiving registration applications from Protestants, but did acknowledge the existence of these groups, an important change. One official in Lao Cai invited Embassy officials to visit a local ethnic minority house church at a later date. Another official in Yen Bai announced that his province is now ready to accept applications at any time. Nevertheless, there is still a great deal of local prejudice and official ambivalence to overcome.

¶2. (SBU) Furthermore, despite (or perhaps because of) provincial authorities' best efforts to promote social progress in the region, tensions between modernization and traditional ways remain. The issues of religion and tolerance are no exception, and addressing these will remain challenges both inside ethnic communities and between communities and their local administrators. End Summary and Comment.

¶3. (SBU) Following U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Ambassador John Hanford's meetings in Hanoi February 21 (reftels), Embassy Poloff and DRL/IRF staffer traveled to the Northwest Highlands provinces of Lao Cai and Yen Bai from 22-25 February. The primary purpose of the trip was to investigate conditions for ethnic minority religious believers in the rural districts of these provinces, with a particular emphasis on advocating for the registration of local Protestant house churches affiliated with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECVN). The team visited Lao Cai's Sapa District and met with the Lao Cai and Yen Bai provincial authorities. Prior to departing from Hanoi, the team also met five ECVN house church pastors from Dien Bien, Tuyen Quang and Lao Cai provinces

ECVN House Church Pastors

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14. (SBU) ECVN General Secretary Au Quanh Vinh arranged for five house church pastors to travel to Hanoi to meet with the team before departing for Lao Cai and Yen Bai. (Note: Although none of the leaders gave us their names, the ECVN has agreed to pass us this information as needed. The pastors were somewhat ill-at-ease and clearly unused to revealing their identities to outsiders. They were all ethnic H'mong. End Note.) The two ECVN pastors from Muon Nghe District in Dien Bien Province (a relatively new division bordering Lai Chau and Son La provinces) noted that local authorities have refused to accept their application to register their congregation on the grounds that "there is no Protestantism in Dien Bien" and therefore "any Protestants in the province must come from other provinces and should apply in their home regions." Because of this strong antipathy, Dien Bien Protestants have taken to meeting for worship in different residences and at varied times. The Muon Nghe pastors also noted that many church leaders have difficulty traveling to Hanoi to pick up religious materials from the ECVN because local officials refuse to give them permission to leave the district and have threatened unspecified punishments if they are caught leaving.

15. (SBU) The two pastors from Tuyen Quang Province (bordering Yen Bai and Ha Giang provinces) noted that Protestant groups in their area also have had difficulty getting local officials to accept registration applications, but in the one instance when the application was actually received in October, the congregation was told point blank not to meet for worship until the application was approved. The congregation had been meeting regularly, if

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unofficially, before this instruction. Since this application has not yet been approved, the congregation in question is also forced to meet in secret at different times and places. Furthermore, since their application, this particular congregation has often been harassed by Ministry of Public Security (MPS) officers, despite the fact that one of the congregation's deacons is actually a member of the local security organization in the district. Other Tuyen Quang congregations have been called in to MPS offices to be told that the applications they had submitted "were useless." Church leaders who asked MPS for assistance in submitting "useful" application materials were detained for several days. The Protestants in these areas were also told that only ECVN leaders in Hanoi could submit applications to register sub-congregations in the province and such applications had to be sent to provincial, not district, authorities, they said. Pastor Vinh noted that the ECVN was told by provincial authorities that only local groups could submit applications, and then only to district level officials.

16. (SBU) The ECVN house church pastor from Lao Cai Province was the most uneasy leader in the group. He explained that his 33-member congregation submitted their application to register with local authorities on October 18, 2005. Officials accepted their application, but told them not to assemble until it was approved. In addition, he was called in by the local MPS office, where he was forced to sign a document renouncing his faith. MPS officials also told him, "You are not allowed to follow religion....If you continue to follow Protestantism, go somewhere else....We don't recognize religion in this district....If you and the others continue to assemble for worship we will arrest you all and we will throw your application to register in the fire...." The pastor tearfully explained that he signed the document of renunciation because he had no choice in the face of their threats.

17. (SBU) Pastor Vinh noted that these were common stories reported by the 300 of the 1200 ECVN congregations in the

Northwest Highlands that have applied to register with local authorities. The ECVN gets most of its information from verbal updates by individual church deacons, but in general it takes them three days of hard travel (without permission) to get to Hanoi. In general, the main problems faced by believers seem to come from local officials rather than other members of the communities in which they live, although there is some community friction, particularly in Lao Cai. Vinh agreed to arrange similar meetings between Northwest Highlands house church leaders and Poloff every two to three weeks over the next six months to gauge the effectiveness of GVN efforts to implement its policy to facilitate Protestant registration.

#### Sapa District

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18. (SBU) Sapa District People's Committee Chairman Hau A Lenh reviewed Sapa's well known success in the area of tourism before addressing ethnic and religious issues. He noted that 53 percent of the district's residents are of H'Mong ethnicity, and there are also significant Sa Pho, Day, Tay, Dzao and Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) communities. Most ethnic minorities in the district do not speak Vietnamese. The district maintains five ethnic villages for tourists that represent the mixed ethnic communities of the major groups in the area. Although the six ethnicities in Sapa have substantially different customs, traditions and styles of living, they are "uniting together" because of the implementation of GVN policies aimed at reducing poverty and hunger and building infrastructure in the more remote areas of the country. Under these policies, nearly all hamlets have been connected to the provincial road network and 60 percent of all of Sapa's 43,000 houses have been electrified (with a goal of connecting all households by 2010). Nevertheless, the Chairman acknowledged that the rising number of tourists to the district (200,000 in 2005, with 60 percent coming from outside Vietnam) has increased the pressure of outside influences on the traditional ways and beliefs of ethnic minority communities.

19. (SBU) Lenh noted that the majority of ethnic minorities in Sapa follow traditional ancestor worship customs and/or Buddhist beliefs. However, there are a small number of Christian followers in the district. He stated that approximately 2,500 H'mong and Dau belong to the Catholic Church, and there are "a few Protestants, but no formally recognized groups." Lenh claimed that local authorities, from the district to the provincial levels, are trying to

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create conditions for religious believers to follow their faiths according to GVN law and regulations. There is no discrimination against Protestants and they are treated "in the normal way." Lenh also noted that Ambassador Marine had on several occasions referred allegations of discrimination against and abuse of Protestants to the Sapa People's Committee, but officers sent to investigate by the Chairman determined that many of these issues were the result of intrafamilial conflicts. According to traditional beliefs, the chief of each hamlet or family plays an important role in ensuring that members of each family follow the customs of society. "Wherever new religions appear, societal conflicts follow as a matter of course." Lenh stated that problems arising over Protestantism first appeared in the province in 1997.

10. (SBU) Poloff noted that during Ambassador Hanford's recent discussions with DPM Vu Khoan, Vice Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong, Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) Chairman Ngo Yen Thi, the GVN acknowledged that the Northwest Highlands remains the most problematic area of the country on religious freedom, particularly with regard to Protestants. The GVN has also committed to resolving the registration of Protestants in this region before the President's visit in November. Poloff encouraged

the District Chairman to proactively resolve this issue in his district before the central Government is forced to ensure the district complies with national policy.

¶11. (SBU) Lenh replied that the district has been trying to register Protestant groups, but that "it takes time." The district does know enough about the specific Protestant groups operating there, but it has received several registration applications from some groups, and local officials have been instructed to forward such applications to the district. However, the district is not authorized to grant approval as the province is the legal approving authority. Furthermore, such applications "must come from an organized group," and none of the applicant groups is an "organization." Poloff reiterated the importance of this issue for our bilateral relationship and predicted that the GVN will make registration of Protestant groups a major policy priority in the region over the next six months.

#### Sapa Catholic Church

¶12. (SBU) Following the People's Committee meeting, the team visited the local parish church. The chairman of the parish board (NFI) explained that the parish is divided into three sub-parishes: one ethnic Kinh (Vietnamese) sub-parish and two ethnic H'Mong sub-parishes. All 2,200 members of the three sub-parishes are ministered to by a priest from Lao Cai City who is only able to visit the parish once a month. However, Hung Hoa Diocese recently ordained thirteen deacons, and one of them has been promised to the Sapa parish. The parish expects him to take up his benefice in April. Poloff asked if parishioners have become involved in charitable work in the district like in other parts of Vietnam. This question elicited an oddly rushed series of tangential responses, mainly asserting that no Catholics in the district use narcotics or other evil substances or participate in crimes, that all H'Mong are now required to learn Vietnamese against their wishes but only because the Church doesn't own any bibles published in H'mong though they now have many in Vietnamese and that the district has done a good job building roads linking believers. In the midst of this performance, the district People's Committee observers continuously barked instructions at the increasingly flustered and visibly nervous parish chairman. The meeting broke down very quickly at this point.

#### Ta Phin Village

¶13. (SBU) The team visited one of the five model ethnic villages on the flank of Sapa Mountain. The village of Ta Phin (or Ta Ping) is comprised of 379 households. According to the village chairman, 264 households are Black H'mong ethnicity and 162 are Red Dzau, and the remainder are ethnic Kinh families. He claimed that all children in the village have access to Vietnamese education up to grade nine, but far more older men than older women speak Vietnamese as most women "have no need to speak with Kinh people." While H'Mong and Dzau are not mutually comprehensible, most villagers understand both languages because they grew up in such close proximity. The chairman noted that the villagers own 500 buffaloes and grow dry-field rice during the region's single growing season.

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¶14. (SBU) While visiting the village, the team observed both a H'mong embroidery training workshop and a Red Dzau civics training class. The locally run workshop focused on teaching H'mong women to adapt traditional embroidery patterns to western-style purses for sale to tourists. The Red Dzau women were being taught the perils of alcohol and failing to save money. Several tourists wandered about the village negotiating with the inhabitants. (Note: No religious activities were visible; however the villagers

clearly lead very traditional lives despite being showcased to tourists. Education appeared rudimentary and it was not clear who benefited from the sale of ethnic goods like the handbags being made by the H'Mong women - the village chairman seemed to be running the production operation. End Note.)

#### Lao Cai City

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¶15. (SBU) Lao Cai People's Committee Vice Chairwoman Bui Thi Kim Dung noted that 64.8 percent of the Province's 600,000 people are ethnic minorities. There are 2,033 villages outside of the major town areas in this mountainous border province. These rural villages have been the focus of the provincial government's efforts to share the annual 10 percent GDP growth within the province evenly amongst its inhabitants. 65 to 70 percent of provincial investment is focused on rural areas where most ethnic minorities live. Some 75 percent of ethnic villages are now connected to the inter-village road network, 75 percent are electrified (in all, 62 percent of the province's households have electricity) and 70 percent of the population have access to clean water. She also noted that 6,970 households have been resettled by the state in order to undertake these infrastructure improvements. These and other investments in agriculture and education have helped reduce overall number of households living below the poverty line in the province from 64 percent in 1991 to seven percent in 2005. A total of 26,600 poor households have been raised out of poverty. Bui also claimed that the poverty reduction program has reduced unemployment in Lao Cai to 0.9 percent as the People's Committee has added 56,000 new jobs in the last five years.

¶16. (SBU) Turning to religion, Bui stated that the provincial government has faithfully undertaken the implementation of all the GVN's new rules concerning religious freedom since they were promulgated in May 2005. There are only 4,000 Buddhists in the entire province; however, there are four major pagodas in the region that receive numerous visitors. (Note: This seems to be a low estimate of Buddhists in a traditionally Buddhist province of 600,000 people. End Note.) Among Christians, there are at least 5,700 Catholics and at least 9,000 Protestants in Lao Cai. Most of the Protestants are found among the ethnic H'Mong, while the Catholics are scattered across all communities. She also said that no Protestant groups have applied for registration (and none are registered), and explained that the province is unhappy because these groups appeared in response to "illegal" missionary activities.

¶17. (SBU) Poloff noted that in Ambassador Hanford's recent discussions, the GVN acknowledged that the Northwest Highlands remains the most problematic area of the country with regards to religious freedom, particularly for Protestants. He also noted that the GVN has committed to resolving the registration of Protestants in this region before the President's visit in November. Poloff encouraged the provincial government to proactively resolve this issue in Lao Cai before the central Government is forced to ensure the province complies with national policy. The Vice Chairwoman thanked Poloff for this information and advice, but made no substantive reply.

#### Lao Cai Committee on Ethnicity and Religion

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¶18. (SBU) Luong Ngoc Cap, the Deputy Director of the Lao Cai Department of Ethnic Affairs and Religion, reiterated much of the statistical information that Vice Chairwoman Bui provided to the team. The province has been doing its best to make people aware of religious laws and to try and prevent social discrimination against believers. Each ethnic group has its own traditions and customs which they, and the province, guard closely. He confirmed that Sapa parish will be allowed to have a new priest in April.



119. (SBU) Regarding Protestants, Luong stated that there is

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"only a tiny number in the Province." Protestantism was brought to Lao Cai by individuals without legal status. Ethnic minorities who follow Protestantism are the cause of conflicts within their families and communities, despite the legal framework protecting them. If missionary activity in the province followed legal guidelines, these conflicts would not exist. "It is fully possible to arrange for believers to practice their beliefs in a peaceful manner," he said. The Province has received some applications from Protestant groups to register and legalize their activities, but all of these applications were incomplete and "did not meet the criteria for approval" established by the Ordinance on Religion, its Implementing Decree and the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism. Nevertheless, he claimed that the provincial authorities are trying their best to publicize and explain these new laws.

120. (SBU) Poloff reiterated that in recent discussions, the GVN agreed that the Northwest Highlands remains the most problematic area of the country with regard to religious freedom, particularly in terms of registering Protestant groups. He also reiterated that the GVN has committed to resolving the registration of Protestants in this region before the President's visit in November. Poloff strongly encouraged the provincial committee on religious affairs to proactively register Protestant congregations in Lao Cai before the central Government is forced to ensure the province complies with national policy. Luong replied that Protestants in Lao Cai are already encouraged to practice their faith at home (in unregistered house churches) and gave the example of Ta Phin village (see paras 12 and 13), which has such a house church. Poloff asked to return to Ta Phin village to visit this church and its leaders. Luong demurred, saying that it would not be appropriate to visit them without warning, but that Lao Cai Province would be happy to facilitate a visit to such a church the next time Embassy officers are in the region. Poloff promised to convey this invitation to the Ambassador and accepted it on his behalf in advance of Ambassador Marine's next trip to Lao Cai Province. He also noted that Ambassador Hanford would also like to make such a visit to Lao Cai and would enjoy visiting a registered ethnic minority house church. (Note: Luong and other provincial officials appeared uncomfortable with the idea that we would take Luong up on his offer in the near future. End Note.)

Yen Bai

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121. (SBU) On the way back to Hanoi, the team made a brief stop in Yen Bai town, capital of Yen Bai Province. The People's Committee Vice Chairwoman, Hoang Thi Hanh, explained that 51 percent of Yen Bai's population are ethnic minorities split between Tay, H'mong, Dzau and Muong communities, with a handful of ten other ethnicities as well. This mountainous province is very rugged outside of the main town, and two of its seven districts are extremely remote. It is much faster to travel to Hanoi from Yen Bai town than it is to reach these districts. Like Lao Cai Province, Yen Bai is currently focusing its attention on reducing unemployment, poverty and hunger amongst its ethnic minority inhabitants. While developing social programs to aid development in education and healthcare in these communities, and working to improve provincial infrastructure, the province is also trying to improve agricultural production (the main industry) by curtailing traditional slash-and-burn techniques in favor of modern farming methods. The provincial committee has issued instructions to districts to train a new generation of ethnic minority cadres to take over local administration at the district and commune levels.

122. (SBU) Turning to religion, the Vice Chairwoman noted

that there are only a handful of Protestants (approximately 100-200) in Yen Bai Province. Most of these are ethnic H'mong who live very close to the border with Lao Cai Province in the two most remote districts. On the other hand, there are over 46,000 Catholics, distributed evenly across the province. She noted that there have been no conflicts or problems with Protestants in the region, but none have applied to register their congregations.

123. (SBU) Poloff reiterated that in recent discussions the GVN agreed that the Northwest region remains the most problematic area of the country with regard to religious freedom, particularly in terms of registering new congregations. He affirmed the importance of this issue for our bilateral relationship and noted that the GVN has committed to resolving the registration of Protestants in

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the Highlands before the President's visit in November. Poloff encouraged the Yen Bai provincial government to proactively register Protestant congregations before the central Government is forced to ensure the province complies with national policy. Hoang replied that the province is well aware that this is an issue of great importance to the central Government and noted that in a recent conference of provincial officials from across Vietnam, DPM Khoan complained strongly that local authorities have not been implementing the new guidelines on registering Protestants.

Yen Bai Committee on Ethnicity and Religious Affairs  
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124. (SBU) Director Tran Duc Thang of the Department of Religious Affairs noted that there are no major divisions between religious groups in Yen Bai Province. He acknowledged the presence of some Protestants, but claimed that the provincial government does not have any accurate statistics on their number because "we are not sure what dogma they follow." Protestants are not clearly organized into recognizable groups, but 62 households in the province follow the religion. Some H'Mong followers of Protestantism have recently converted to Catholicism or reverted to traditional ancestral worship. Regardless of their number, Yen Bai Province respects the Protestant's beliefs by allowing them to worship in their homes. Thang said, however, that no Protestant groups have applied to register themselves.

125. (SBU) Poloff reiterated points that the Northwest region remains the most problematic area of the country with regard to Protestants and registration, and encouraged the Yen Bai religious affairs authorities to proactively register Protestant congregations before the central Government is forced to ensure the province complies with national policy. Thang asserted that any groups who apply now will be welcomed and approved by the local government. Poloff thanked Thang for this positive news and promised to inform the ECVN that Yen Bai province will now accept applications from their sub-congregations.

Comment  
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126. (SBU) Our overall impression is that the provincial and local authorities in this middle part of the Northwest Highlands are coming to recognize that the central Government has made resolving the issue of registering ethnic minority Protestant groups a major policy priority. Unfortunately, the ECVN house church pastors' disturbing reports underscore how much local prejudice and official ambivalence the GVN must overcome to effect real change for the better. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that local officials are starting to acknowledge that Protestant believers actually exist in their areas of responsibility.

127. (SBU) Furthermore, despite (or perhaps because of)

provincial authorities' best efforts to promote social progress in the region, tensions between modernization and traditional ways remain. The issues of religion and tolerance are no exception, and addressing these will remain challenges both inside ethnic communities and between communities and their local administrators. End Comment.

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